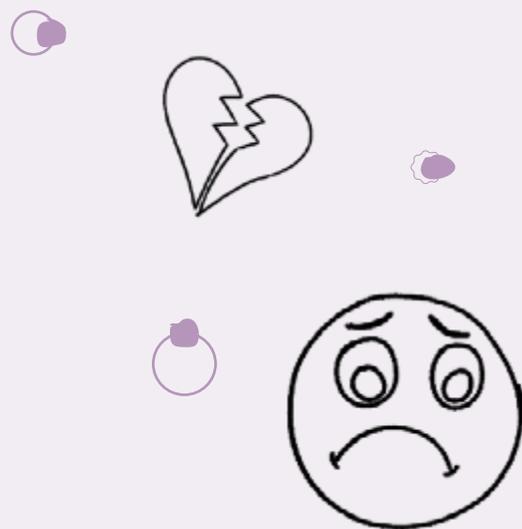


Experiences of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) on online dating apps and social media platforms among university students in South Africa



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FIRN is a network of researchers, activists and practitioners from Global South countries in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America. FIRN focuses on the making of a feminist internet, seeing this as critical to bringing about transformation in gendered structures of power that exist online and offline and to capture fully the fluidity of these spaces and our experiences with them. Members of the network undertake data-driven research that provides substantial evidence to drive change in policy and law, and in the discourse around internet rights.

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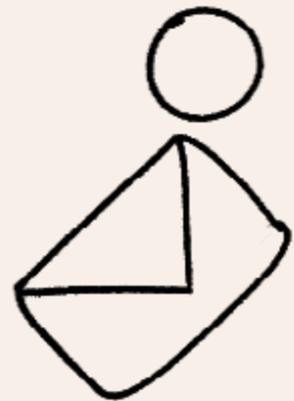
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Executive summary

This report presents the research carried out in four South African universities: the Independent Institute of Education (IIEMSA Campus); the University of the Witwatersrand Main Campus; North-West University's Mahikeng and Vanderbijlpark Campuses; University of KwaZulu Natal's Westville and Howard Campuses. The research combined both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to provide a holistic understanding of South African university students' understanding of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), their experiences of TFGBV on social media as well as online dating apps, the types of TFGBV as well as the emotional effects of TFGBV occurrences. Drawing on survey responses and focus group discussions, the study offers valuable insights into how South African students navigate digital relationships and the vulnerabilities that emerge in online environments.

Key quantitative and qualitative findings reveal widespread unfamiliarity among participants with the term TFGBV, despite many students having directly experienced or witnessed forms of technology-based abuse. Also noted is the general ignorance of the harm TFGBV causes, resulting in under-reportage. Additionally, the study highlights the intersectional vulnerabilities of groups such as LGBTQI+, racial fetishism and single mothers.

Introduction



Social media and intimate relationship-building

Social media can be defined as internet-based platforms that facilitate ongoing and lasting communication, enabling users to create profiles through which they can interact and share user-generated content, including text, posts, comments, voice messages, links, pictures, videos, GIFs and emojis. Through these communication functionalities, social media platforms allow users to share content and information, interact and build personal as well as group relationships. Interactions based on user-generated content can be exchanged in real time and for many social media platforms, this can be saved or downloaded to be accessed over a long period of time.¹ In return, generators of content can see their receivers' response or reactions to their messages either as texts, likes, followings, emojis, etc. They can also have insights into their receiver's online behaviour through virtual time stamps (whether they are online/offline, when they were online), profile and status images, and profile information.

Research indicates that social media users not only build social relationships online but also have an integrated combination of social media platforms. Such an integrated social media platform mix becomes a synchronised system which allows user-generated content to easily be accessed, shared, stored or re-created from one social media platform to another. Based on this integration, social media users combine a variety of social media platforms to meet diverse needs.² For example, WhatsApp is an instant messaging app, designed for end-to-end encrypted communication. However, a user-generated video, voice message or image sent in private can be uploaded by the receiver on to YouTube (a social media for videos) while the hyperlink created on YouTube can be reshared with other contacts and even to the general public from other social networking sites (SNSs) like Facebook or Instagram without the original user-content creator's knowledge. Likewise, discussions made through online dating apps (ODAs) could be shared on other social media platforms such as WhatsApp without the consent or knowledge of the online dating app contact.

The ability users have in creating an integrated social media system (ISMS) makes interactions through virtual means a central part of young people's lives. Research indicates that social media is used as a mood management tool (youth are known to seek out safe spaces within social media platforms that evoke joyful and relaxing moods and avoid responding to content that incites anxiety or negative moods and feelings).³ When building intimate relationships through social media, these moods and the feelings shape whether the relationship

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will be toxic or pleasant. Positive or negative feelings are also shaped by the multimodal features of their ISMS platforms (comments, likes, emojis, posts, creating and sharing of personal and intimate content) can all improve and support the building of an online relationship.⁴ These features allow partners to express themselves and receive positive expressions in return.

The level of negative or passive behaviour is ascribed to phases in an online relationship based on the intentions of the user. At the starting or initiation phase, passive behaviour has been identified as a method some users use to initiate a relationship. Such action could include indirectly indicating an interest by liking a post, commenting, sending a friend request, or following. For introverts, this is a method that helps them avoid face-to-face contact and avoid unnecessary discomfort that live conversations can result in. They also do not have to worry about their physical appearance when chatting online, and, when faced with rejection, it seems less painful.⁵

However, such actions may or may not lead to a conversation or a relationship. Passive behaviour becomes a form of violence when the intention is associated with online surveillance, whereby the user is more involved with information seeking, tracking and paying attention to the interactions of a target online. While in some cases such passive online behaviour could be positive in that the user wants to know more about their current or potential partner and learn new things in a passive way. However, in many cases, it can lead to stalking across several social media platforms.⁶ Research indicates that such passive and negative behaviour online increases the possibility of the user perpetuating other forms of online sexually related violations such as sending inappropriate sexual content, sharing or posting sexual content about a person, and spreading hate speech. Most often, the target of such online violence are women, members of the LGBTQ+ as well as other minority groups. Such violations are often based on a host of factors, including the gender and sexual orientation of a target.⁷ Within heterosexual relationships, men and boys will more often want to monitor and control their partner's user-generated content creation, and how and when they respond to other contacts on their ISMS platforms.⁸

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Building intimate relationships through online dating apps

Like social network sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn, online dating apps (ODAs) require users to create detailed profiles to facilitate meaningful matches. Users often share information such as age, race, education, relationship status, occupation, income, language, religion, astrological sign, habits and hobbies. Reasons for using dating apps vary from seeking serious relationships or new friends to looking for casual encounters.⁹ Once a profile has been developed, the user then makes use of the basic and advanced search functionality to select and filter attributes they would like to have in their potential partner.¹⁰ However, unlike SNS, most ODA platforms require premium users to pay a fee to enhance their communicate with identified users they find attractive. This means those who turn to ODA platforms to search for partners are usually better educated and have higher incomes than the average population.¹¹

Social media and TFGBV

TFGBV has received growing scholarly attention in recent years as digital technologies increasingly mediate social and intimate relationships. While definitions vary, TFGBV generally refers to any act of gender-based harm perpetrated using digital technologies, including cyberstalking, image-based abuse, digital sexual coercion, online harassment and doxxing.¹²

In South Africa, TFGBV intersects with systemic gender inequality,¹³ with approximately 33% of women reporting experiences of online harassment.¹⁴ In the South African context, TFGBV remains under-researched, especially amongst the youth, with most literature focusing on offline gender-based violence (GBV),¹⁵ despite the country's expansive digital engagement among youth populations.¹⁶ GBV, more broadly, is deeply entrenched in South African society and in higher

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education institutions, with high prevalence rates and significant underreporting due to fear, stigma and distrust in institutional processes.¹⁷

The emergence of digital technology for social interactions and connections has added new dimensions to GBV, transforming traditional forms of harassment and abuse into more pervasive and less easily regulated online forms.¹⁸ Over the years, several South African universities have documented rising TFGBV cases linked to dating and the growing adoption of social media apps.¹⁹

With an increased number of South Africans between the ages of 18 and 34 being active users of social media spaces²⁰ and of university students using online dating platforms such as Tinder,²¹ these platforms have been identified with the possibility of amplifying risks of exploitation and violence with serious psychological implications.²² The fear and stigma associated with reporting TFGBV further contribute to its underreporting and the persistence of a culture of silence.²³

Globally, youth are increasingly turning to digital platforms for connection. In South Africa, this phenomenon was apparent on platforms like Mxit (now defunct),²⁴ and more recently, Facebook²⁵ and WhatsApp²⁶ are dominant channels for youth communication and interactions. However, social media's evolution from networking to relationship-building has normalised digital intimacy²⁷ while obscuring risks exacerbated by anonymity, deception, as well as increasing vulnerabilities for abuse due to heightened trust and emotional investments.²⁸

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In South Africa, the rise of online dating apps such as Tinder, Bumble, OKCupid²⁹ as well as social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram³⁰ has fundamentally altered how South African students form and maintain intimate relationships.³¹ They also create environments where anonymity, accessibility and virality facilitate various forms of TFGBV.³²

Project objectives

This study set out to achieve the following objectives:

- To identify the factors that shape the perception of South African university youth's usage of social media and online dating apps in relation to TFGBV.
- To examine the types and frequencies of TFGBV experienced by South African university youths when using social media and online dating apps.
- To understand how TFGBV intersects with minority groups in South Africa.
- To understand the emotional impacts TFGBV experiences have on South African university youth.
- To assess the reactions and responses of South African youth to TFGBV experiences.

Research questions

- What factors shape the perception of South African university students' usage of social media and online dating apps in relation to TFGBV?
- What are the types and frequencies of TFGBV experienced by South African university students when using social media and online dating apps?
- Change to: How does TFGBV intersect with minority groups?
- What emotional impacts do TFGBV experiences have on South African university students?
- What are the reactions and responses of South African students to TFGBV experiences?

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Research methodology



This study adopted a mixed-method research design to examine factors that shape the perception of South African university students' use of social media and online dating apps in relation to TFGBV, types and frequencies of TFGBV they experienced, how TFGBV intersects with minority groups in South African universities, and the emotional impacts TFGBV experiences have on South African university students and their responses to their TFGBV experiences. The approach was designed to combine the breadth of quantitative data with the depth of qualitative insights to provide a comprehensive understanding of this complex phenomenon from the perspective of feminist theories.

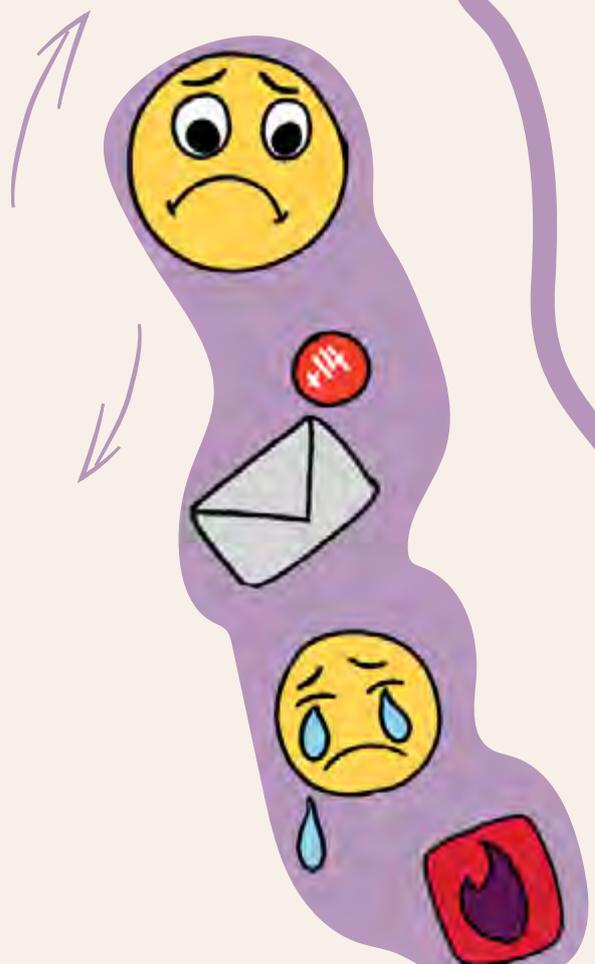
STUDY SITES AND SAMPLING

The research involved four South African universities: the Independent Institute of Education, University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) and North-West University (NWU). These were selected to reflect differences in institutional type, location, historical background and student diversity. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to reach a broad range of students for an online survey. Participants had to be over 18 and enrolled at one of the selected campuses. Probability sampling was not feasible due to the logistical challenges and privacy restrictions imposed by the South African Protection of Personal Information Act 4 (POPI Act).³³ After a thorough cleaning process – which involved removing incomplete, duplicate and invalid responses – 620 responses were deemed complete and valid for statistical analysis.

All the quantitative data derived was exported from the survey platform into Microsoft Excel and subsequently imported into STATA version 18 for statistical analysis. For the qualitative data, a thematic analysis was performed using Braun and Clarke's six-step method to identify and report key patterns. The qualitative findings provided context and depth to the quantitative results, especially concerning complex socio-cultural and emotional factors.

33. <https://www.gov.za/documents/protection-personal-information-act>

Reflection of the ethical process



THE QUANTITATIVE PHASE

Student field workers from each institution helped to recruit survey participants by sharing a QR code in WhatsApp groups and student platforms, after being trained on ethics and consent. Contracts ensured ethical standards, with consent obtained from universities and field workers. Snowball sampling was encouraged as peers forwarded the link, while Wits University distributed the code via its student linkserve.

The survey, hosted on QuestionPro, required electronic informed consent; participants could only proceed after confirming voluntary participation and confidentiality. No personally identifiable information was collected, anonymity was protected through disabled IP tracking, and data access was restricted to the research team.

THE QUALITATIVE PHASE

Participants for the TFGBV focus group discussions (FGDs) were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in gender, age, academic level and experiences, adhering to ethical and institutional requirements. FGDs took place at the four chosen universities, with trained field workers helping with the recruitment of students by sharing QR codes and making announcements. Interested candidates completed a registration form which collected their contact details.

Each session had a unique code based on university and order.

- IEMSA (A) and IEMSA (B) for two sessions at the Independent Institute of Education – MSA Campus
- WU (A) and WU (B) for two sessions at the Wits University Main Campus
- UKZNW (A), UKZNW (B), and UKZNH (A) for three sessions at the Westville and Howard Campuses of UKZN
- NWUM (A), NWUV (A), and NWUV (B) for three sessions at the Mafikeng and Vanderbijlpark Campuses of NWU

On arrival, participants signed the consent forms and sat at numbered seats, which were used as pseudonyms for data transcription (e.g. WUA3 for participant 3). If a number was not referenced, codes like WUA! were assigned. This process ensured diverse viewpoints in FGDs about TFGBV among South African university students were systematically captured. Data was recorded on phones and laptops and transcribed using Sonix.ai. In the analysis, aspects of participant's sexuality are only mentioned if in their responses they publicly make their identities known. Research assistants noted racial and gender differences, and these were included in the qualitative analysis.

Presentation and discussion of research findings



Quantitative and qualitative demographic data presentation

Table 1: Gender and sexual orientation of respondents

Gender	
Man	155 (25.0%)
Woman	455 (73.3%)
Non-binary	8 (1.3%)
Prefer not to say	2 (0.4%)
Total	620
Sexual orientation	
Heterosexual/straight	505 (81.5%)
Gay	12 (1.9%)
Lesbian	20 (3.2%)
Bisexual	54 (8.7%)
Other	11 (1.8%)
Prefer not to say	18 (2.9%)
Total	620

Table 1 shows that most respondents identify as women (73.3%), followed by men (25 %). Non-binary and “prefer not to say” together make up the remaining 1.3%.

Table 2: Demographic characteristics of survey respondents

Age	
18-20	262 (42.2%)
21-24	289 (46.6%)
25-29	55 (8.9%)
30+	14 (2.3%)
Total	620

Race³⁴	
Black African	487 (78.6%)
Coloured	91 (14.8%)
Indian/Asian	14 (2.7%)
white/European	24 (3.9%)
Prefer not to say	4 (0.6%)
Total	620

Table 2 shows that respondents between 18 and 24 years form the largest clear band with 46.6%, and a good representation of respondents who were 25 years and above. Undergraduates dominate the sample with over 85% while postgraduates account for the remaining percentage. Although the survey reached a typical undergraduate-heavy population, it still captures many postgraduates and mature learners. Finally, by race, Black African respondents form the clear majority (78.6%) of the sample, followed by coloured respondents (14%), white (3.9%), and Indian/Asian (2.7%), roughly reflecting the racial distribution in the country.

34. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethnic_groups_in_South_Africa

Qualitative data presentation and analysis

Table 3 shows the distribution of the focus group discussants by their institution, gender and sexuality.

Table 3: Breakdown of focus group discussion respondents

University	Campus	Session code	Number of participants	Gender/race of participants
The Independent Institute of Education	IIEMSA	IIEMSAA	11	1 white South African female 1 coloured South African female 1 Black African female 3 Black South African females 5 Black South African males
The Independent Institute of Education	IIEMSA	IIEMSAB	6	1 Black South African female 1 Coloured female 2 Black African international female students 2 South African Black males 1 white South African male 1 white bisexual male
Wits University	Main Campus	WUA	6	3 Black South African females 1 LGBTQ+ Black male 2 Black South African males
Wits University	Main Campus	WUB	6	3 Black South African females 1 LGBTQ+ Black male 2 Black South African males

University	Campus	Session code	Number of participants	Gender/race of participants
University of Kwazulu-Natal	Westville Campus	UKZNSA	11	7 Black South African females 4 Black South African males
University of Kwazulu-Natal	Westville Campus	UKZNSB	11	6 Black South African females 5 Black South African males
University of Kwazulu-Natal	Howard Campus	UKZNSH	11	2 LGBTQI+ Black males 5 Black South African females 4 Black African males
North-west University	Mafikeng Campus	NWUM	6	6 Black South African males
North-West University	Vanderbijlpark Campus	NWUVA	7	3 Black South African females 1 coloured South African female 3 Black South African males
Northwest University	Vanderbijlpark Campus	NWUVB	8	5 Black South African Females, 3 Black South African males

Table 3 shows the distribution and characteristics of FGD participants in all the selected campuses. In terms of race, only the sessions held at the IEMSA campus represented white male, female and bisexual genders. This may have been based on the diverse and smaller population of the campus. Another exception was at North-West Mafikeng campus where all the respondents were heterosexual Black South African men.

Data presentation and discussion

Intimate partner seeking behaviour on social media and online dating platforms

The survey found 71% of participants seek intimate partners both online and offline, while 16% use mostly social media, and 13% prefer physical venues. Most participants combine these approaches for relationships. WhatsApp is the top social media platform (55%), followed by Instagram (20%) and Facebook (11%), consistent with its popularity among South African social media users.³⁵

In terms of online dating, 70% of participants had never tried online dating, 19% were former users, and 4% were current users. Among the current users, app usage typically lasted up to 36 months, mostly three to 19 days per month, with 71% spending one to two hours daily. All joined due to failed relationships and a desire for long-term commitment, with little interest in casual dating. Most maintained conversations for less than a year; 43% met over five people offline, usually within one to two months. While 57% rated their experience as somewhat positive, major challenges included finding compatible partners. However, due to the small sample size, results are inconclusive.

Of past users, 41% spent one to two hours per day on dating apps and 39% spent less than an hour. Some found it easy to attract interested contacts, but many struggled to find mutually compatible matches. Experiences ranged from negative to neutral for most, with safety and identity concerns frequently cited. Some 67% met up with one to four people, and 65% informed family or friends before meeting the contacts. The main draws were meeting diverse people and control over communication, while stopping use was mainly due to forming physical relationships or losing interest. The majority (55%) would not recommend dating apps, though 31% would.

Themes derived from the qualitative data gave more insights to the quantitative data explaining the patterns of behaviour of the participants in relation to building a relationship through online dating apps as well as social media platforms. These themes include:

Perceptions for a mixture of physical and online channels for relationship-building:

IEMSAA 1, a Black South African female, explained that online platforms like WhatsApp and Instagram can make dating harder, as it “creates [...] a tendency for people to think that online interactions are enough to sustain a relationship” but often this is not the case. In her opinion, her generation loses a lot when they depend more on social media than spending “real time with the person that you’re with”. IEMSAA 9, a white South African female, noted that “it’s difficult to get to know who the person really is over social media” because people often behave differently online than in person.

35. McInnes, K. (2025, 20 March). Op. cit.

Perceptions of online dating risks and dangers are based on traditional media as well as social media reports:

A number of the participants confirmed the finding of the quantitative data, indicating that they did not know anyone personally who used online dating apps, nor had they ever used them personally. IEMSAA7, a Black South African female, just hears “stories from the news and social media platforms”. For WUA3, a Black South African female, the information gained from these platforms makes her believe:

[P]eople being catfished [...] put themselves in danger by talking to someone who possibly isn't even that person that they think they're talking to. [F]or all [you] know, while on an online dating app you are talking to an ex-convict.

The anonymity and perceived dangers associated with online dating are what shaped the decision of IEMSAB3, a Black South African female, not to use online dating apps. She indicated that “it's from personal choice”. In addition to not knowing whom one is speaking to through the apps, participants, such as NWUVA4, a Black South African female, highlighted possible risks like “being kidnapped, [human] trafficked, used for bad things, abused. Sometimes they even meet serial killers who are out there for revenge.” For WUB7, a Black South African female, “inasmuch as you might say that you want to meet them in a public platform or a public space whereby there's people around, a lot can happen.”

Perception that social media platforms are more secure

WUA3, a Black South African female, believes that instant messaging apps like WhatsApp are more secure because:

You can't screenshot someone's profile picture, making it safer. On a Facebook or Bumble or Grindr app, how can you ensure that you're secure? How do you make sure that you're talking to this person?

For NWUVA7, a Black South African male, WhatsApp makes it easy to be in control. For him, the account holder does not have to tolerate abuse because “you can easily block them, you can report them, you can even record (content) that is sexually explicit. Then they will look into it.”

TFGBV experiences of personal friends/family members from online dating

Several participants indicated they had no experience with online dating, stating that their hesitation stemmed from accounts shared by friends, family members and peers. WUA9, a Black South African female, recounted how a friend got mugged when he went to meet an online contact. She described this incident as “tragic”:

[The individual] came back phoneless, shoeless, and they [had] wiped out his bank accounts. They asked him to transfer all the money he had left [through] his iPhone. They took the new Balance shoes he was wearing.

IEMSAB 8, a Black South African female, described what to her was the “traumatic experience” of a close friend who met someone on Tinder. After a number of interactions, the friend got comfortable with the individual because, “she feels like she knows this person” and agrees to meet up. Then “this guy [was] trying to assault her and getting violent”. She concludes, “That’s the danger of like [...] speaking to someone on social media without getting to see them in person. [I] think that’s such a big risk.” Similarly, NWUVA10, a Black South African female, narrates the experience of a friend with a Tinder account who met someone who used the identity of an acquaintance “only to find out that it was someone older than what had been said in the Tinder profile.” The most disturbing, however, was an incident recounted by WUB4, a Black South African female, of a student researcher who met up with a contact through an online dating platform who was kidnapped and allegedly killed on their date.

Personal experiences of physical harm or harassment through online dating

Participants who had been on online dating gave accounts of some of the TFGBV experiences they encountered. WUA9, a Black South African female, indicated that she did not last long on online dating apps because she was afraid of what she perceived as risks of “being kidnapped or getting mugged. Meeting someone somewhere at some place and then getting trafficked or something.” For NWUVB4, a Black South African female, the risk is of emotional damage “because people lie a lot about who they are. [Y]ou can get attached easily.” WUB9, a Black South African male member of the LGBTQ+ community, said his experience was more physical:

[T]wo, three years ago, I met this person who sent me his photos. So, upon meeting [...] I realised this is not the person that I was talking to online. [It] was actually a planned kidnapping of some sort and I had to run away. It was traumatising.

Similarly, WUB7, a Black South African female, recounts:

I met someone online and he was the person in the picture. But then when I decided that I don’t want to continue with it anymore, this person started being aggressive. [He told me] I have to listen to him because he paid for my food. He [...] picked me up from where I stay and I don’t think that was a nice encounter.

WUA9, Black South African female, had a different experience on Bumble, a dating app. She describes it as a “misinterpretation of what people are doing on dating apps”. According to her:

[W]hen someone sees you on a dating app, they think that you're just (there for) sexual encounters. There's this way that they will sort of soften you with words like, "Let's have a date." But they [...] will always be trying to get someone into bed. And they think that everyone that is on the app is just trying to find sex, sex partners.

Why young people will still opt for online dating

Despite the negative possibilities that can be associated with online dating, IEMSAB6, a Coloured South African female, believes that online dating and its associated apps will still be relevant in the lives of young South Africans because "young people want to go into the dating world, but they do not want to approach one another [directly]. So, the easiest way to do this is [through] platforms that [keep] their privacy."

Perception that social media is a medium more likely to initiate TFGBV

Easy access: Although online dating apps (ODAs) are associated with risks, participants believe that social media platforms are more associated with TFGBV. NWUVA8, a Black South African female, explains:

[TFGBV] is mostly experienced through social media more than dating apps, mainly because almost everybody has access to social media platforms. Not everybody knows a lot about dating apps, and not everybody prefers dating apps. But then, most people use social media.

NWUVA4, Black South African female, explains this further:

I believe that they experience [TFGBV] through social media, mostly because that's where most of the time we can post everything that we want. Body shaming, verbally abusing by posts and all that. We know that they will see them because not everyone is on a dating app; they are more exposed to social media where they will read that message very quickly.

NWUVA6, a Black South African male, adds:

There are people [who use] social media as a platform whereby they can say things to us [...] in public. They find social media platforms a suitable place whereby they can say every idea they want without being seen, without being judged. They talk whatever they want, whatever feeling... whether good or bad... They just continue to share whatever.

Anonymity: IEMSAB8, a Black South African female, identifies the ability to share negative messages without the receiver knowing the sender's identity as a major form of TFGBV:

It's very easy for people to hide behind their screens and be comfortably [...] saying [...] the most gruesome and the most, you know, vile things because they feel like [...] if I can hide my identity, it's easy to just be as open and be as vile and vulgar (as) possible. Like it happens a lot on social media. You'll see people with fake profiles. Some have even the guts to do it on their actual profile without hiding.

Security: Participants indicated their distrust in some of the social networking sites (SNSs) to protect their user-generated content and them from other users who might want to harm them using their content. NWUMA6, a Black South African male, states:

I think in all these social media platforms, Facebook and others, can restrict [posts] because the minute you post, it can be taken down immediately. But Twitter doesn't have those restrictions. People can access [...] those videos [...] for about two weeks before they take it down. Already it has caused damage [by then].

IEMSAB1, a white South African male, adds, "On platforms like Twitter, there's very little a person can actively do to limit the amount of harassment they'll get, especially with how the application has changed in the last three years."

UKZNH11, a Black South African female, points out the hazards of the video generating sites:

You know, especially those TikTok, Instagram, Facebook. People post their pictures there and they get [...] exposed to the world. And it's those small comments, people commenting something bad under your post, and then you feel like it's just for entertainment and then that escalates and escalates [and] they can be more exposed to being violated by people that they never knew.

For NWUVA6, Black South African male, social media is not a private thing despite the privacy statement. "The (perpetrators) get information about you. Whether you delete the post, you report it, they have already gained access about you. They can research you and do anything they want." NWUVA10, a Black South African female, adds:

[All] the years of me being on social media, I've noticed that despite reporting the people [...] these social media apps don't really do much about it. Like the time someone's identity was stolen, she reached out on social media. She's like, [...] please help me block this person. She came back with a report [...] that she does not have enough evidence that this person is impersonating her. You can report multiple times, but still that

person will come back in a different name or account. So, it's not safe enough.

IIEMSAB5, a Black African international female student, expresses genuine fear:

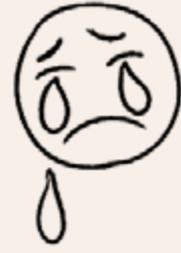
What happens when we trust people and you think it's a community that you built only for those people to abuse (that) trust. There's Telegram and there are [...] Telegram chat rooms, in which the most vile information about anyone is just shared. And at some point, all of their addresses are there and they will send someone a link and they will say, "If you do not do this, we will basically go to your house and beat you up." . Sometimes they don't even care that you know who they are, but they know who you are. So, you are the person who's scared.

Discussion

Participants have a fear for online dating from news (both traditional and online media) sources, stories told by friends and family, and personal experiences of online dating contacts. Nevertheless, some youth still see online dating as a possible channel for meeting and developing an intimate relationship.

Despite the negative perception many participants have of ODAs, there is also great reservation over SNSs such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) as many perceive them as channels for TFGBV. While the TFGBV violations respondents associate with online dating are more physical (kidnapping, murder, rape) the violations associated with social media are more emotional (viral negative posts and comments to their uploaded posts and pictures, resharing of negative comments about users as well as the inability of social media operators to protect users and their generated content). Participants also have diverse notions about the level of privacy provided by ODAs and SNSs, believing that some are more efficient because of their configurations. While messaging apps were not identified as a potential TFGBV channel, the Telegram chat room was mentioned based on its public sharing feature. This indicates that the major feature on which TFGBV thrives through social media is the public sharing feature a number of SNS platforms have.

When it comes to building relationships online, TFGBV associated with online dating has to do more with the anonymity of the online contact; while for social media platforms, it is more of the negative comments that can easily be disseminated through integrated social media platforms. This also explains why instant messaging apps are identified in the survey as the preferred medium by participants for building online relationships.

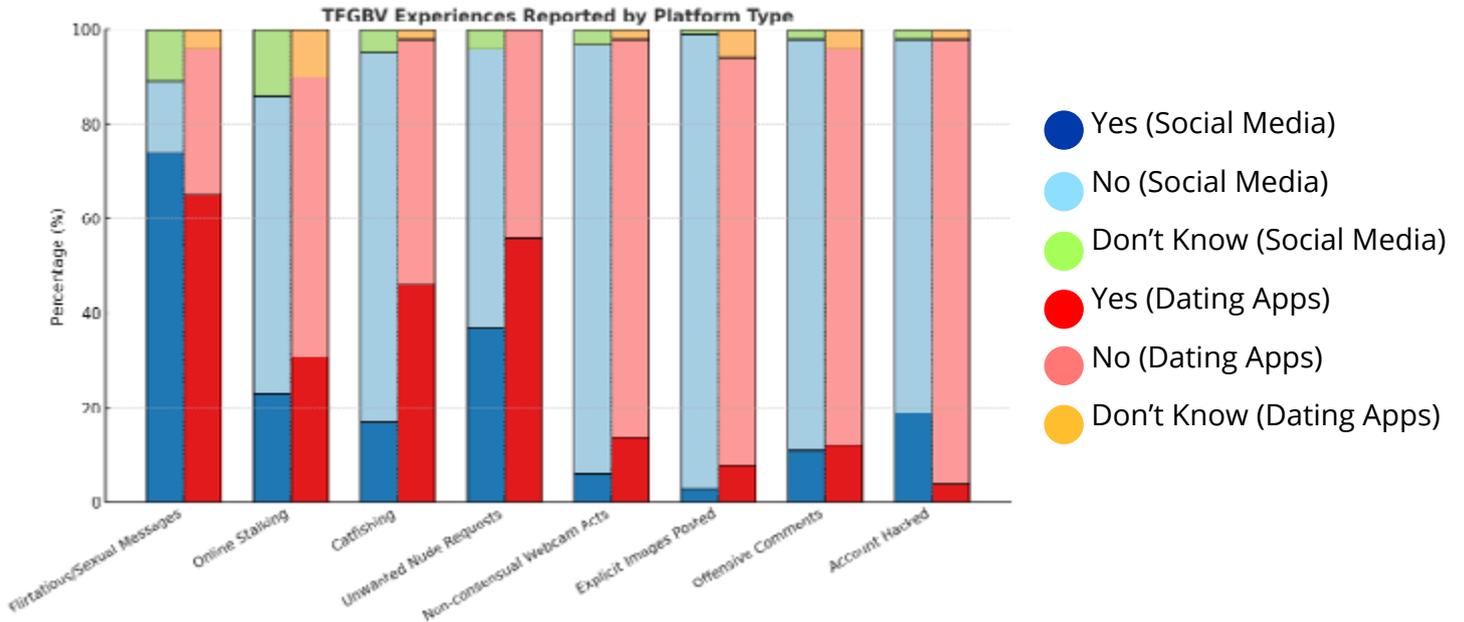


TFGBV associated with ODAs and social media platforms



The research wanted to understand the nature and patterns of TFGBV experienced by participants on social media platforms as well as online dating apps. Data for this was gathered from social media users and compared with past users of ODAs due to the limited number of participants who said they currently use online dating apps. The data is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: TFGBV experiences of respondents using social media and online dating platforms to build a relationship



From the table, the most frequent forms of TFGBV indicated for both social media as well as online dating are sexually intrusive violations (receiving flirtatious or sexual messages, and unwanted requests for nude photos/videos or to livestream sexual acts) followed by online stalking.

Insights into the TFGBV-related responses the participants encounter were provided through the following themes generated from the qualitative responses.

RECEIVING FLIRTATIOUS OR SEXUAL MESSAGES

Receiving flirtatious or sexual messages was deemed as a significant form of TFGBV by the participants. They indicate that this is done by other account users or complete strangers as a way of getting their attention to initiate a relationship. IIEMSAB4, a white South African male, says, "My sister (and) some of my female friends... It's just insane what they go through every day. Someone's in their DMs, messaging them genitalia pictures, or they're asking for 'sugar daddy or sugar babies', for a relationship."

UKZNBW7, a Black South African female, speaks from personal experience: “On my Instagram page, I have been receiving pictures from people, like disgusting pictures of their private parts and stuff.” Such experiences were described by some participants as “oversexualisation”. UKZNBW2, a Black South African female, complains, “I’ve had personal experience with being sexualised on social media; the [...] negative comments coming in. I’ve been dragged by a girl on social media and sexualised by men [I have trusted].” WUA8, a Black South African male member of the LGBTQ+ community, points out that it is not about how one presents oneself on social media:

Some people are just weird and just oversexualise you and send unsolicited pictures [and] comments on your stories and everything, and it becomes uncomfortable. To the extent that I had to take a break, not even a break: I deleted Instagram because of that. It got too much. Because I was constantly being oversexualised. Sexual coercion [...] it’s so uncomfortable.

Requests for nude photographs

Requests for nudes were highlighted by participants as not just personal experiences but also experiences of people they were close to. UKZNAW2, a Black South African female, recounts the story of her cousin:

[Her boyfriend] asked her to send him her nudes and she did. He showed the pictures to all his friends without [her] knowing. And she found out through someone who is mutual; [it] messed with her mental health.

Requests from strangers is cited by UKZNAW7, a Black South African female. “I was approached online by this elderly man who is overseas, and he offered me money to send him pictures.” An even more personal account comes from NWUVA4, Black South African female:

[S]omeone, we are not dating or anything, but I get messages through my inbox, asking for nudes. Whenever I refuse, they [use] words like you think you are better. You think you are cute. You think your body looks nice. I can get a better girl than you. You think you are special. To a point whereby [they] spoke harsh words which [...] hurt. Even though you can block and delete. But those words still give you that thing.

Online harassment

Participants, especially those with SNS accounts, identified forms of online harassment that often involves people they do not know. IIEMSAA2, a Black South African female, recounts:

There was one person I recall on Instagram: he just kept texting and texting and texting. And even though you say, like, I'm not interested or I'm not trying to have a relationship with you in that way, they are just constantly you know, harassing you.

Likewise, WUB7, South African Black female, narrates:

[I] don't know this person; I met them on Facebook. They sent me a friend request. I accepted. They showed interest in me, and I did not show interest in them back. But then I found them posting my pictures on their page, and they had put captions that I am their partner. I was scared. I didn't know what to do. I just blocked [and deleted] them and [...] reported the page. I hope that no one else, or none of my close friends, will see that, because I don't know this person, but [it's] gonna appear on my people's feed, and then my people [are] gonna say, I am dating this person, [...] it's your partner because why would someone just take your pictures and post?

UKZNH7, a Black South African female, recounts a similar experience on an SNS which entailed a number of TFGBV experiences, including attempts at catfishing:

Through Facebook, [...] there was a person who used another person's profile pic. And he started talking to me. Okay, I will respond, "Hello, how are you? I'm good." [He would say], "I like your page. Can you send me your photos?" I'm like, "No, I cannot share my photos with you. I don't know you." He's like, "You can see my page, [but] I cannot be too sure that that's you. But send your pictures. I won't do anything. [It's] just pictures." I was like, "No, my pictures are my privacy. I won't share with you." And he kept, like stalking me, saying things until I blocked him.

Online stalking

Online stalking, especially through SNS, was identified by participants as a concern. NWUVB4, a Black South African female, refers to someone stalking her "excessively". "He looked at my social media platforms. He would claim he knows me, threatening me, and just [make] nasty comments." NWUVA8, a Black South African female, recounts:

At first [he] would take my pictures, post them, and be like, this is my person. And I didn't know anything about that. And [...] he even got my contact details, and would call every day and all that. Until it got to a point where it was like, now I am no longer online. Like I would see him everywhere I go.

Impersonation

Another point raised by the participants was impersonation. IIEMSAA3, a Black South African female, says:

I know a friend of mine who has an Instagram account and she had someone basically take all her pictures and post them on another Instagram account, come up with a similar name and username, but almost the same username. And they basically were saying that this person is an OnlyFans model. And so now people would come across that page thinking that this girl is an OnlyFans model [and even] want to hire her [thinking] that it's her account.

For NWUVA4, a Black South African female, "it's easy to impersonate someone by using their pictures" on Facebook. "You will be accepting that friend request thinking you know the person, only to find out it's someone else [misusing the pictures]."

Other forms of TFGBV

Other forms of TFGBV recounted were less frequent, such as doxxing, for instance. WUB5, a Black South African female, says, "I [saw] someone had posted [that my sister] was looking for marriage and left her contacts there (on Facebook). The person [was] being vengeful." IIEMSAA2, a Black South African female, referring to deepfakes, cites an instance:

I had a friend who one of the guys in my class used her face [without consent] to create, like, pornographic photos, even though it wasn't her. He just plastered her face with these random bodies, and he uploaded them on social media. She had to report him so that it could be taken down.

Finally, were a few cases of social media account hacking, as narrated by IIEMSAA8, a Black South African female:

I have an Instagram account and I don't even know how a stranger just happened to get my password. And they took the account, and [announced] there I am their girlfriend. I did have a strong password.

Intersectionality of TFGBV experiences with social media and online dating for members of the LGBTQ+ community

A number of the TFGBV experiences encountered through online dating were narrated by members of the LGBTQ+ community. Participants who represent this marginalised group indicate they fear expressing and revealing their true sexual identities because a number of them come from backgrounds where such orientations are not acceptable nor recognised. This prompts them to turn to social media to express their sexuality and to online dating apps to seek intimate partners.

UKZNH8, a Black South African male, voices the reservation LGBTQ+ members have about coming out:

I have a friend who is LGBTQ and afraid of expressing himself. He is scared of the community how [it] will, like, respond to what he is or the way that he wants to live his life. He usually posts pictures on social media maybe showing how he wants to live his life, but is just too scared of telling his parents of what he is or like because some of us, we came from villages, [and] we don't usually know about this thing or this gender. And now there [are] social media platforms like TikTok that usually help these people to express themselves.

And, as WUB1, a Black South African male, notes: "The LGBTQ guys get mostly abused on what they post, 'Oh I didn't know you are like this. I didn't know you were like that.' Because of their sexual identities, some face harassment."

IEMSAB1, a bisexual white male, speaks of his experience:

I have experienced forms of harassment. I have matched with men before and I do find often men can be the worst. I have come across a few females that have treated me pretty harshly. Some have also been quite offensive, rude. I've received threats from one or two people. However, it is commonly I find men who are the primary perpetrators.

Economic vulnerability: As youths and university students who lack financial means, members of the LGBTQ+ community feel they are targets to older married men who have money but are not happy in their marriage; or who have discovered their identities at a much later age. Respondent UKZNH9, a Black male member of the LGBTQ+ community, spoke very passionately about his experiences with a married man who he felt exploited his vulnerability as a young, financially struggling student:

To us people of LGBTQI+, the perpetrators are mostly loaded guys, the ones with money. Secondly, unhappy married men, because I've experienced that. You'd find a guy not just a guy. He's a man, a married man going with his family. You see him, it'd be like, okay, he's a happy married man. Only to find out that he's not happy. If he comes to you, ..it'd be like, "I'm living a lie; I've been married for six years now. This is not the life I wanted. I just discovered myself at a later stage that I was not meant to be living this life." What happens if that person comes to you as a person who's still growing up? You just discovered yourself. You'd be like, "Oh, I just found a matured guy." No that's not it. He's there to destroy you just because his life has been destroyed. And in yourself, you'd be like, "Oh, I'm so loved. I just found a matured guy who'd be taking care of me. And you'd be like, 'Okay, I'm not well financially. He's there for me.'" There's no such thing. At the end of the day, it's going to hurt you.

Sexualisation of the LGBTQ+ male body: The major form of TFGBV identified by the LGBTQ+ members however is related to the sexualisation of the male body. WUB9, Black South African male member of the LGBTQ+ community, attempts to capture this through his experience with Grindr, an online dating platform:

Having experienced Grindr myself, I would rank sextortion up there, [where] it's very common for other males to coerce you to send photos, naked photos of yourself or videos. And they normally do that by sending you theirs without asking for your permission, without even saying, "Hello, hi, what's your name?" in expectation that you will also do the same. And if you don't, [it leads] to cyber bullying.

He says this form of TFGBV is worse on social media platforms than ODAs. He continues:

Even on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, people can still create fake accounts or what we normally call burner accounts, and they would still do, you know, what they would do on Grindr. You don't know who that person is because they're just sending you a half-body picture or something like that. [By] that time on social media [people] would have seen you... maybe your family, where you live, the places that you frequent the most.

For respondent UKZNH9, a Black male member of the LGBTQ+ community, sending explicit photos can be dangerous, leaving his community members more vulnerable to future attacks, blackmail and harassment. As he puts it:

[From our] perspective, most of us tend to search for love [through] dating apps just because some people – inasmuch as people are free [to live] their lives to the fullest – prefer their life private. For example, here on campus, we're about 30 (who) are open that we are among the LGBTQI family. And then in search of love, I would be like, "Okay, since I see that maybe few individuals are open, I would explore the dating apps." That's where you encounter many problems. Problems could be, you are talking to the person [but] it's not the person you think he is on the profile. It could be catfishing. And then the conversation goes well to a point [where] people exchange pictures of which in the near future, that's going to haunt them because the person will be manipulating you [through] those pictures you sent, which could lead to so many consequences. Like, it could be, as an individual, you're about to be exposed. You may not take that well. You'd be, like having suicidal thoughts; defamation of character. There are so many things involved.

Intersectionality of online dating with motherhood

Traditional stereotypes about single mothers create avenues for TFGBV. NWUVB8, a Black South African female who is a single mother, expresses her frustration at the notion that just because she has a child, she cannot aspire to have an intimate relationship:

[T]here is a stigma that once you are a mother, you are desperate to find a man. [I]t makes you seem like you're looking for something that is already not there; but you're not looking for someone to be a stepfather to your child, you're just looking for an intimate relationship which makes you more [...] exposed to things that you're not supposed to be exposed [to]. I had an experience with someone. We were [at] a talking stage. He told me that he does not want to be a stepfather of my child. And I was like, "I don't need a stepfather for my child. I'm just looking for a romantic relationship." [He] told me that there is no way he's going to marry someone with a child because that was below his standard.

Intersectionality with race: Fetish-related TFGBV

Black women may encounter white males who are driven by a fetish desire to be with a Black woman. IEMSAB7, a Black South African, expresses her frustration. "[I] have personally experienced, [on an] online dating app, white men wanting to be with Black women, and they would actually say such offensive things like, 'I just want to experiment what it's like being with Black women. I just want to feel if your bum is actually real'."

DISCUSSION

Participants experience diverse forms of TFGBV both through ODAs as well as social media platforms. The pattern of abuse is mainly based on sexually related content (receiving and requests for nudes, and oversexualisation of the bodies of male members of LGBTQ+ as well as Black African women.

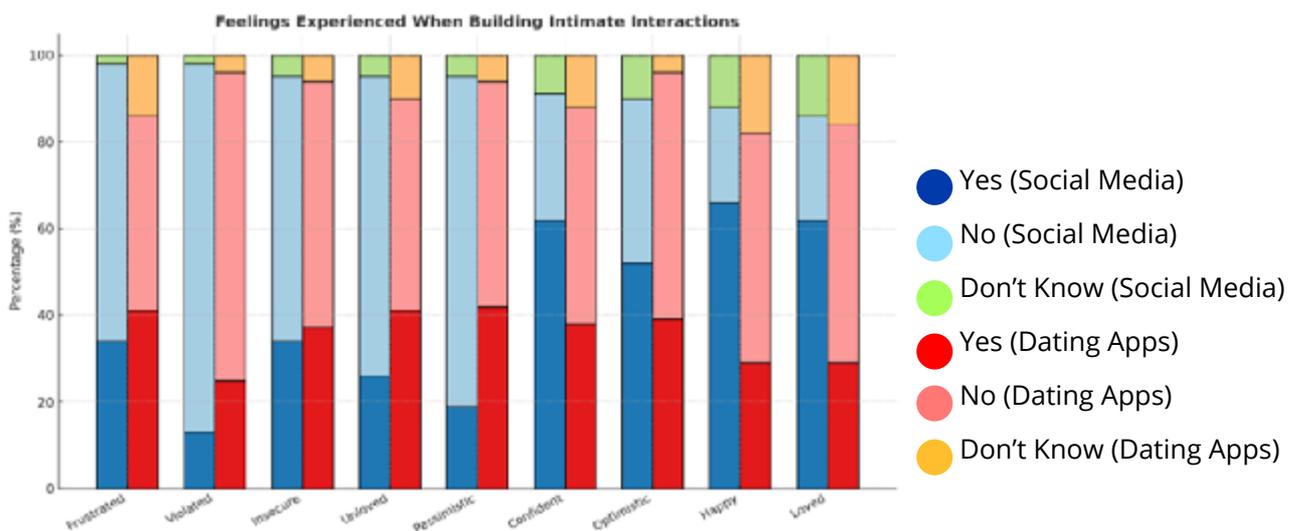


Positive and negative emotions from social media interactions



The research attempted to understand the impact of negative and positive emotions that TFGBV can cause when encountered through social media and ODAs. By comparing social media users with past online dating app users, it was expected that due to the limited physical interactions ODA users had with their contacts, as well as the limited time they spent in communication with their contacts, there would be more negative feelings expressed compared with social media users who have access to combined integrated social media platform systems and others also have access to them through the same channels. This question aimed to understand more of the participants' personal feelings resulting from social media and online dating platform interactions. The responses are in Table 5.

Table 5: Positive and negative feelings experienced when using social media and online dating platforms to build an intimate interaction with a contact.



From the data, frustration figures in the major mix of emotions apropos of both social media as well as for ODAs. In both social media and online dating, feelings of insecurity also indicate mixed negative and positive emotions. More positive emotions include being optimistic and confident.

Some insights were provided by the participants as to what prompts some of the more negative feelings they experience when interacting with an intimate partner through digital media platforms and experiencing forms of TFGBV.

NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

Frustration

Frustration was mainly presented by participants as an emotion directed at the self. UKZNH3, a Black South African female, states, “[I] think the anger is more towards yourself, that you put yourself out there and you feel like it’s your

fault that everything is happening the way that it is because of yourself and the decisions you took.”

There is also the frustration over what trying to look for love online can lead to. WUB3, a Black South African female, points this out:

[I] think it's definitely traumatising because firstly, there's no shame in trying to look for love [...] online because we live in a digital era; that's how things work for us. So I feel like the victims [...] feel lonely [and unheard] because you're trying to create a sense of community. [B]ut at the same time, this is the space they need to come back and exist in.

Unloved

Feeling unloved when encountering forms of TFGBV such as harsh and insulting words from strangers and intimate partners, especially at the initiation and exiting stage of relationships, some participants say, produces a series of negative emotions. Asked to describe some of the emotions they felt when they encountered diverse forms of TFGBV, IEMSAB1, the white South African bisexual male, encountered online insults to his person on the brink of his breakup. He says, “[F]rom my own experience with the individual I spent about 10 years with, I went into [...] a type of social media remission for a year. I completely lost all activity online. I stopped talking to a lot of people. [T]his was mostly just mental and emotional stuff.”

NWUVA4, Black South African female, tries to explain from her experience why this can be so detrimental:

[Some] people are more emotional and usually they don't [like] reporting such things. They will be looking at the message, beating themselves [...], focusing on whatever you said. Even if I report or delete it, it's still considered violence [...] and I might end up hurting myself like [those who] don't take violence the easy way, [...] to a point [where] you will find scars on their bodies. [I] used to have scars and some of them are still visible. Whenever I'm alone, I would blame myself for whatever they said or whatever they did. And I would take maybe a knife or something sharp just to give myself scars, thinking that it might be some form of healing because I'm not the type to be talking.

IEMSAB5, the Black international student, encapsulates her emotions as “you feel quite dehumanised. You feel very empty after that.” While for UKZNSWA4, a Black South African male, “anybody who is faced with such is left with a mix of emotions: self-blame, self-hate. Because this happened to you. Because you brought this to yourself.” WUB9, the Black South African male member of the LGBTQ+ community who experienced the sexualisation of his body online from an online contact, vents:

I can't tell about other people, but myself, it really hurts my self-esteem. So, I feel self-hatred, you know, in a way. It feels like I have no worth. [My] worth is being attached to a nude photo or video or something like that. And sometimes you would send [...] photos of yourself, the best photos that you think you have, and they send you a response, "[W]ell, what? Your body is not [...] pleasing." [T]he body shaming aspect gets in [...] and you, you immediately get hurt. And that thing sort of like would sit in your mind.

Violated

IEMSAB4, a white South African male, speaks of his experience online:

So I believe that it could be quite a de-realising experience [...] because in a way you make a persona on the internet. You make a persona online, and when that persona is shattered, you don't really have anything behind it and that can leave you feeling just completely empty. It can leave you feeling quite destroyed, crumbled down to your bare bones, and depending on what happened to you, it can be anything from you feel disgusted by yourself, maybe by a person you feel frustrated (with). How could you be so deceived?

For WUB7, the Black South African female, the violation comes with emotions related to shame:

I think shame and fear are [what] people experience when one encounters this violence and the fact that [...] I feel like also some lack of respect as well. You feel like the person does not respect you. And I feel like hate. Hatred for the person comes very late. You mostly scared, you mostly ashamed, you mostly panicking and all that. And you hate yourself more than you hate that person.

Pessimistic

The negative effect of TFGBV also affects how the victim interacts with prospective intimate partners both on and offline. UKZNA2, a South African Black male, surmises:

[T]heir future relationships are affected, how they trust people who they are going to be with in the future. And I think it will bring a lot of traumas that you have to face. [P]eople are going to forget at some point, but you won't forget. It's [...] gonna stick with you, the shame, and you will have to deal with it. Those [...] short-term and long-term emotions, it affects them going forward. [T]he relationships they also have with their families. It makes it really hard for them to face (them).

WUA3, a Black South African female, points out that negative emotions need not elicit an immediate reaction. She adds:

But some people's comments like stick to you. So, it affects how you view yourself long-term. It affects how you deal with life. It affects how you deal with those types of people if you meet them physically. [T]o a certain extent you internalise it. [The comments] start to affect your confidence as a female or as a male or non-binary, etc. It affects your decisions.

Taking this further, NWUMA5, a Black South African male, observes that negative experiences makes one vigilant because of what can happen on social media platforms. This leads one to be wary of even those who approach with good intentions "because I don't know this person. Why is this person sending me this message [is] based on the experience that happened before."

Insecurity and loss of confidence

The participants note that depending on the type of TFGBV encountered, the resultant emotions could include the feeling of insecurity and lack of self-confidence. IEMSAA7, a Black South African female, states:

[Y]ou'll be afraid to, like, post yourself on social media because it doesn't even matter if your account is private or not, because you could be somebody who's already in a following and it could be somebody even close to you, because there are cases like that. [It makes] me afraid."

For IEMSAB3, a Black South African female, it is all about anxiety. "[I] think mostly feelings of anxiety. And like also we have this sense of mistrust of everyone that we come across. [A]re they real? How do I know if they are real? Am I sure of this person I'm speaking to?" WUB5, a Black South African male, says, "I feel like mostly [it] really damages your self-confidence and self-esteem."

Positive emotions

Positive emotions inspired by online interactions and relationship-building were also considered. Based on participants' responses, the following themes were developed, which give depth to the quantitative responses.

Confidence

Many participants speak of the confidence to control how a relationship is initiated and built online. WUB3, the Black South African female, enthuses:

[Y]ou have full control of the situation. You can decide you want to start talking to the person, if you want to send a picture or not. So, everything

that you do there is totally in your control. [I]t takes away like the anxiety aspect of things where you can just [...] ask anything without the fear of losing the person or being judged. [You can] even learn more about yourself, the things that you like and things [you] don't like. It gives you a variety of [...] options.

For UKZNA1, a Black South African female, online dating is where:

[Y]ou are [...] able to write upfront or show upfront the qualities of the person you're looking for. So, the people responding to your profile or your post will be the people that you are actually looking for. [Y]ou are not like talking to people randomly. You [...] develop a deeper affection from there.

For NWUMA2, a Black South African male, building a relationship online helps you understand a person before meeting them because, he says, many men do not always approach women personally. "It's better for us to approach online, to get to know each other more. [N]ow you have that confidence [...] because women will say, when you (meet physically), you are too boring, you must be trying to be romantic and all those [...] things."

NWUVB8, a Black South African, female, addresses social media's empowerment:

[Y]ou get to choose how you portray yourself to that person. [I'm] a very straightforward person. I know that. But I can choose to tell that person that I'm a very shy person. I'm reserved. I'm kind. [It] could all be a lie. [A]s much as it is a bad thing for the other person, it can be an advantage for me as the person who's doing it because I want to look nice.

NWUVB5, a Black South African female, speaks of one's confidence in deciding what content to share. "You may select a few things or share only positive things about you. You don't need to give the person your whole background."

For WUB9, the Black LGBTQ+ man, says online presence gives him the confidence to "stalk":

I think stalking can have a positive impact. Because think about [...] stalking your crush on Instagram. [T]o see who they are friends with, who do they choose? [Y]ou don't even want to like their picture by mistake, because you don't want them to find out that you're stalking them. [Particularly] when you come to a point of uncertainty about that person. One of the best things that you can ever do is to do a background check: find out who are they dating. Where were they [...] two months ago? Who have they been speaking with? Do we have mutual friends? You can get that information, like within 10 minutes. That's exciting.

For NWUMA5, a Black South African male, this confidence can only be sustained online:

[Y]ou don't have to go and meet that person. [...] Sometimes you want a particular lady. But by the virtue of her being a student and me being a student, I won't make it. So, it gives you that self-confidence to say whatever you want online. [T]here are things that I say online [that are] very difficult to say [in person]. So, you are bold, you are confident on [...] social media. [Y]ou just be yourself because this person doesn't really know the surface; you can be yourself or not be yourself; there are no judgments.

Happy

Participants spoke of feelings of happiness from interactions in diverse ways. IEMSAB1, the white South African bisexual man, believes that social media platforms allow people to build a good relationship "with people you may not see in your lifetime." He recounts:

I've been friends with somebody from Australia for the better part of five years now. I mean, they tell me they're from Australia. [...] If it was not for that accessibility through the media platform of Discord, I would not have met this person. I would not have been able to build the relationship I have with them, and I consider them a good friend.

For WUB7, the Black South African female, it is "getting to know [and] talk to this person for hours and hours online. You can send each other messages and get instant responses. It's nice to be heard [and] talk to someone that you can be able to call at any time. And they answer."

Similarly, UKZNA3, a Black South African male, finds it a relief to "talk to a person without having to worry about anything." He explains:

If you had a bad day, you can just go to a person that you've never met before [...] just message the person. It becomes way easier for you to talk to them through texting. It feels like they understand you. And since they've never seen you before, they have a different perspective of you that everyone around doesn't have, and they respect you more because they don't know anything. [I]t's way easier to come to them about your situations because in a way, they can act as a therapist when you [...] come to them with your problems. It just feels like they understand, you know? But once you start transitioning to physical, it declines.

NWUVB9, Black South African female, adds, “[Y]ou can just call them and tell them this is what happened.”

For other participants, this feeling of happiness over online contacts is based on more concrete advantages. For UKZNH4, Black South African female, it saves the bother of travel and resources “because when you go meet them, you spend money.” This way, “you don’t get too intimately involved. I mean, for us girls, [you] just preserve yourself as a lady.” NWUMA3, South African Black male, adds that “when you meet (physically), you have to pay and go out.” NWUVA4, Black South African female, also voices her reluctance over face-to-face meetups. “I don’t get to meet the person. I’m too lazy for (physical) meetups. [...] I’ll make excuses. We will be interesting on the phone, we will connect. But meeting, (no).” While for WUVB1, Black South African female, “I don’t always have to be present. If it’s online, you can just lie.” With such relationships, “it’s very easy to detach from someone online than it is to detach from someone physically,” says NWUVB8, a Black South African female, while for others, like NWUVB11, Black South African male), “it’s the peace of mind.”

Optimistic

Optimism that online relationships can open opportunities that physical relationships may not be able to was a significant theme. IEMSAB5 and IEMSAB2 are two Black African female international students who describe their home countries as “conservative”. The former says social media “allows you to connect with people who have different perspectives and who share passions with you that you wouldn’t really be able to find in your everyday life.” IEMSAB2 believes social media gives people some form of escape from reality. “[Y]ou’re like in a dream world, you fantasise about it: the whole idea of a global village. Social media has helped to implement that, which is a good thing.” WUA9, Black South African female, loves the networking the media affords. “[B]eing able to connect with other people, other worlds, learning about other cultures, language, it can really open up [...] opportunities, cultural diversity”. In addition, “it brings the world closer. People can now intermingle (with) someone who’s completely different from how you were [brought up],” says UKZNH1, Black South African male.

Participants also identified the opportunity social media facilitated to build lasting platonic as well as intimate relationships. UKZNH11, Black South African female, notes:

[T]here are so many people who got like serious relationships that they have like built from online. Some are even married to the people that they met online, living the best life ever because not everyone is out there to hurt other people. Some people are very genuine. [Y]ou can meet a person

who actually wants to build something, who has pure intentions.

NWUVA10, Black South African female, gives the example of a friend who met someone from America through social media and now they are engaged. "So, there are [...] beautiful aspects to social media despite the negativity. I don't think social media is the problem. It's us, the humans, how we make use of it."

Loved

Under this theme are accounts of participants who developed intimate or platonic relationships online. NWUVA10, the Black South African female, says her current relationship was formed online on Facebook through a post:

It has allowed me to meet someone amazing. [L]ike as much as there's negativity [in] social media, there's also positive outcomes. I wouldn't have met this particular person if it wasn't for that Facebook post or [...] me having Facebook [account] in the first place.

More platonic relationship accounts were given by respondents. NWUVA6, Black South African male, recounts:

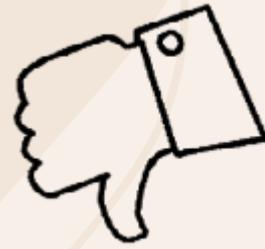
[I] have a friend on (social) media. Sometimes we don't communicate [...] because of some fights, then (we) will come around and (she'll) tell me, "I missed you." We're very close. She didn't trust me at first, now we treat each other like darling, sweetheart and stuff. We don't use extreme words like love. We formed a bond and we grew from there [...] maybe two years without even meeting each other, only on social media, Facebook and WhatsApp. Strictly friends.

For NWUVA4, Black South African female, it was a casual beginning for a friendship that she did not take seriously initially:

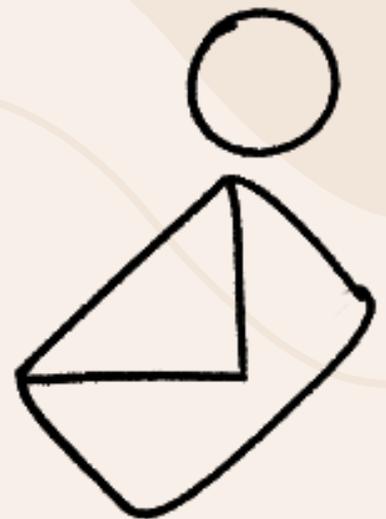
But then through talking, I found out that he's not bad. He just wanted friendship. I remember there was this time I was complaining about not finding a spot for being a tutor. He knew my details, so he applied for me. I found that I was accepted. He's a good friend, even though we haven't met face to face. We only talk when it's necessary.

Discussion

A mixture of emotions was reported through the survey and qualified through the FGD sessions. These diverse emotions correspond to other studies that indicate that youth are strongly affected by their online interactions.



Responses and reactions to TFGBV as perpetuated through social media apps



The research attempted to understand the responses and reactions of the participants to TFGBV as perpetuated through online platforms. The quantitative survey indicates that respondents are less likely to share their negative online experiences. Asked if they shared their negative online experiences with anyone, 53% indicated no while 45% indicated yes. Asked who they would likely share these experiences with, 51% indicated friends/colleagues/peers; 24% indicated family members (parents, siblings, aunt, etc.) while only 7% indicated a professional body (e.g. legal practitioner, psychologist or public official), and 3% a member of the university council or other bodies of authority. More respondents, however, were more likely to share positive experiences, especially their online dating experiences (69%).

To provide more insights into the under-reporting indicated in the quantitative data, themes from the qualitative responses are presented below.

Perceptions of TFGBV reporting

A number of factors derived from the qualitative data explains why the participants are reluctant to report negative TFGBV experiences they encounter from social media platforms and online dating apps. These are presented below.

Social judgment/victim-blaming, and stigma surrounding TFGBV victims

Participants indicated their fear of social judgment as a major reason for not reporting their experiences of TFGBV because they were looking for love or building a relationship online. UKZNA1, Black South African female, explains that people are afraid to talk for fear of being judged and facing questions like, “What were you doing looking for love on social media? Why didn’t you look for it here, right here in front of you?” NWUVB6, Black South African female, adds:

[T]here will be questions like, ‘Why did you accept his friend request in the first place? Why did you follow him back?’ [I]t’s going to be like I went from experiencing this horrible thing to being interrogated about this horrible thing, and now I’m made to look like I initiated this horrible thing.

WUA3, Black South African female, adds, “Let’s say you met someone online [and] you have a date with them. And something happens during that date, I think the [words] mostly used on social media is, ‘You asked for it.’” Such victim-blaming mentality of the society is “what I find to be very painful, especially when you’re the victim but you face the social blaming ... you start to believe it,” says IEMSAB1, white South African male bisexual.

UKZNH9, Black South African male member of the LGBTQ+ community, believes “the virtual world is evolving, but not the South African society”:

Inasmuch as we are living in a society where we (are) exposed, like it's a different society from what (it) was like maybe 20 years back. The emergence of [...] online dating apps or [social media] has changed the society [...] though there are people who still live life (as) lived back then. So, if I come here, I'll be like, "I experienced TFGBV," and the person would be like, "How do you go about trusting someone you never met?" That's where judgment comes in. So, I'll be hindered to voice out and be like, "Oh, what is he gonna say? I was so naive to go about exposing myself to a person I've never even met before."

WUB 9, Black South African male member of the LGBTQ+ community, adds:

[I]n 2017, if you met somebody on Tinder, it was a taboo. But I think lockdown sort of normalised that because we couldn't really meet face to face. I remember particularly [...] there was a scourge (of cases) [and the] police station would have a poster saying Stop Meeting People on Grindr. But the reality is that you can't control what people really do at the end of the day.

TFGBV is difficult to conceptualise/report

A number of the participants had never heard of the term TFGBV and lament that failure to recognise it as such inhibited them from reporting their experience as a crime. WUB7, Black South African female, explains:

[I]nsulting people and just posting someone's pictures without their consent. I don't know the term for that, and I don't think others know the term as well. So we wouldn't even be aware that this is happening. Yes, we have the POPI Act, but I feel like there's limitations. Because, even if you were to go to a police station and say someone is stalking (me), someone is using my pictures. Our justice system in this country is not the best. Those are [...] things that might not even be taken seriously. We hide it because it happens online and our parents or elders warn us against the dangers of social media. So, we just didn't say anything.

WUB7, Black South African female, explains the trauma of reporting TFGBV:

[W]hen you explain something, you have to relive it, you have to go back and you have to re-experience everything again. You have to take that person you are reporting to through whatever you've been through and you don't know who [it] is. Even though maybe this is their account, you don't know their address. You don't know their details. You just have their social media handle. And that is not much to go on because it's just a profile and not who they are or where they [are]. It's like their details are vague. I don't think social media is designed to protect us as users, but that

can take a turn, especially when the user is now a perpetrator. [You] can't [say] this is where I can find them [...] when we go to the police station to write a report. [Y]ou don't have their (perpetrator's) details.

However, for IEMSA7, Black South African female, a major challenge would be "knowing who to go to because, like I said, especially with the older generation, it's not really taken seriously because it's online. So the first step would be knowing where to go." In addition, WUA1, a Black South African male, points out:

Not being allowed or given the platform to actually voice out your concerns or actually say, "I went through this," is the actual issue, because [...] for a man, if you get to experience it and. say, "I want to go report this," you go to the police station and then you become a laughingstock. Not being given the platform to actually say I went through this [...] makes it hard to [get] the perpetrator punished.

Law enforcement agencies are not equipped to take on TFGBV as a crime

The participants believe that the South African law enforcement body is not properly equipped nor trained to take on TFGBV cases. WUB7, Black South African female, states:

[O]ur justice system is really poor [...] for online (crimes), because you're going to report an account or [...] a person behind an account. So you are at risk of being told that it's not that serious, it's not that deep. You can just block them and move on. I feel like they don't know what to do and as a result they end up not doing anything. I have seen people saying they went to report someone who is (experiencing) online bullying, but I've not seen the follow-up (from) the police (nor) [the] perpetrators retracting everything.

Emphasising this, WUA1A, a Black South African male, points out: "If I go [to the police station] and say this person just beat me up for no reason, chances are high that I'm going to get justice. But if it's online, they take it lightly [and] say like, 'How do you prove this?' It's like a lot of research to find the person." For UKZNA3, Black South African male, "I feel like the only (GBV) crime that they try to focus on is rape. And people getting mugged." NWUMA5, a Black South African male, is equally sceptic:

[A] person might be scared to go and report because experience tells that person that [in] the previous cases reported on the matter, there [were] no serious consequences. Like the issue [of] nude pictures online, [justice] must come from law enforcement, so that the next person can see that you can [...] be punished for doing something like that.

UKZNA2, Black South African male, thinks the government should take these issues seriously. "I'm not sure [but] there's no policy on TikTok (for) children under a certain age." He fears it could lead them to online GBV. UKZNH2, a Black South African female, however believes:

[T]here are laws that government had laid out there for people who actually suffered from this type of gender-based violence. If someone like made a silly comment about someone online, they can take them to court for that. But I think government has to put more focus now because it's actually affecting people. And, if something can be put out there for everyone to know that there is something called TFGBV. Because people are only aware of GBV. [Y]ou can see people like getting arrested because of GBV; there are awareness (campaigns) about GBV, but not TFGBV. The only thing that government helped with TFGBV is if someone said something about you, you come to court and they will maybe publicly apologise for what they said. That is the only thing that is there. So, if it can be put out there, maybe the government as well can [...] have laws that regulate this.

Discussion



Conclusion

The research, through both quantitative and qualitative insights, was able to explore patterns of TFGBV experienced by South African university youth through social media and online dating. The quantitative data indicated low usage of online dating apps, and the qualitative data revealed the reasons for this to be media, family and friends' accounts of negative physical experiences of attempted muggings and even murder. Also factored in is the anonymity associated with online dating – not knowing who the online contact is. However, respondents also identify social media platforms, especially SNSs such as Facebook and Instagram as channels for more emotional forms of TFGBV (generation of negative comments, posts as well as sharing of these negative contents). The research also found that generating and sharing of sexually explicit messages was a major form of TFGBV participants experienced, mainly at the initiation of a relationship. This may be in the form of contacts requesting for nude images or videos or sending them without consent. For minority groups such as LGBTQ+ communities, TFGBV cases are mainly based on their intersectionality as members, students, young, and financially constrained. This makes them vulnerable to exploitation as well as physical and emotional harm. Similarly, young single mothers looking for intimate relationships are exposed to misogynistic comments directed at their positionality. Last but not the least are experiences of Black women who receive fetish-related comments stemming from sexualisation of their bodies.

While building relationships, TFGBV forms are more aggressive during the initiation and exiting phases. Facing these forms of TFGBV can greatly affect the emotions of youth engaging on social media or ODAs. The research identified mixed emotions within the quantitative data. These experiences were further given meaning within the qualitative data, which identified themes of insecurity, feeling unloved, pessimism, and feeling frustrated. More positive emotions include feeling loved, optimism, happiness and confidence. These feelings are a response to the positive or negative interactions the participants had while engaging with online contacts.

Finally, the quantitative data indicated that most participants would not discuss the more negative experiences they encounter through their online interactions, and if they did, they would rather tell their friends, peers and colleagues. Very few confide in older members of the society. Themes derived from the qualitative data gave depth to this data. These contexts indicate that participants are afraid of social judgment, and believe that the law enforcement is not sufficiently or adequately equipped nor trained to take on cybercrimes. This means that perpetrators are rarely caught, but victims are faced with secondary victimisation.

Limitations of the study

This mixed-methods study presents several limitations, which should be considered when interpreting the findings and in planning future research.

Sample representation and generalisability

The research was conducted within select campuses of public and private higher education institutions, which may not fully represent the wider population of South African youth or all types of higher education in South Africa. Consequently, generalisation apropos of students from technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges may be limited due to differences in digital literacy, access and socio-economic factors.

Under-reporting and social desirability bias

Due to the sensitive nature of TFGBV, some participants may have under-reported their experiences because of concerns about judgment, shame, or internalised stigma. Responses in both surveys and focus group discussions might have been influenced by perceived social norms, particularly regarding LGBTQ+ identities or non-consensual sexual content, possibly affecting the accuracy of self-reported data.

Terminological confusion and conceptual gaps

The research found a general lack of awareness and understanding of the term technology-facilitated gender-based violence, among participants. This factor may affect the quality of quantitative data, as participants could have had difficulty identifying or labelling their experiences as TFGBV, leading to inconsistent or incomplete responses.

Platform-specific variations not fully explored

While participants referred to various platforms (e.g. WhatsApp, Facebook, Tinder, Grindr), the study did not analyse experiences by individual platform or algorithmic features. This limits the extent to which distinct digital environments and their roles in facilitating or mitigating gender-based violations can be understood.

Temporal limitations and evolving digital practices

The study provides insight for a specific period and may not account for changes arising from shifts in digital communication and online dating practices. Alterations in platform policies, user behaviour and technology could influence patterns and forms of TFGBV, highlighting the value of longitudinal research.

Limited legal and policy engagement

Although institutional perceptions and the Protection of Personal Information Act were mentioned, a comprehensive examination of legal frameworks was not conducted. As such, the relationship between law and student experiences of TFGBV remains insufficiently addressed.

Acknowledging these limitations is important for contextualising the study and informing more robust and targeted future research.



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*Experiences of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV)
on online dating apps and social media platforms among university
students in South Africa*